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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Arbeitspapier / working paper

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:
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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Beck, M. (2013). *The comeback of the EU as a "civilian power" through the Arab Spring?* (GIGA Focus International Edition, 2). Hamburg: GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies - Leibniz-Institut für Globale und Regionale Studien. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-331767>

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The Comeback of the EU as a “Civilian Power” through the Arab Spring?

Martin Beck

On 12 October 2012, the European Union was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for, among other things, “the successful struggle for peace and reconciliation and for democracy and human rights,” as the official press release states.

Analysis

The Nobel Prize organization’s explanatory statement matches the EU’s traditional self-image as a “civilian power” not only in European affairs but also in its foreign relations. However, when applied to the EU’s policy towards the countries south of the Mediterranean, the civilian power approach exhibits many problems.

- The Arab Spring has repoliticized cross-Mediterranean relations. In the 1970s, the EU based its self-image as an actor in international relations on a civilian power approach. The aspirations of an ideal civilian power are based on the promotion of nonviolent conflict resolution, democratic values and social justice. Yet in the decade prior to the Arab Spring at the latest, the EU’s approach towards the Arab world had become very “pragmatic,” meaning that European claims regarding the EU’s progressive foreign policy were purely rhetorical.
- Still, a heated, partially ideologically charged debate among scholars – and politicians – on the EU’s self-image continued. The main reason the approach managed to remain on the agenda, despite empirical counterevidence, was that the pre-Arab Spring environment, with its authoritarian regimes, was hostile to a civilian power.
- With the Arab Spring, a quasi-experimental situation has emerged; whether the European self-image matches the reality thus needs to be tested. Since the Arab Spring it has certainly become more common for European politicians to use major elements of the civilian power approach on the rhetorical level.
- When compared with major empirical developments since the Arab Spring, the civilian power approach does not adequately explain European relations with the countries south of the Mediterranean.

Keywords: EU, cross-Mediterranean relations, civilian power approach, Arab Spring

The EU as a “Civilian Power:” A Heated and Politicized Debate

A scientific article written by Karen E. Smith (2005: 63) “attempts to knock off once and for all the idea of ‘civilian power EU’, and indeed the idea of naming the EU as a specific kind of international actor.” If this was indeed the author’s intention, she failed: other scholars have continued to hold up the concept and its application to the EU. For instance, Mario Telo (2007: 35) insists that the civilian power concept is fruitful for analyzing the foreign policies of the EU, thereby emphasizing the distinctiveness of the EU as an actor in international relations (Telo 2007: 36). In a speech given on 2 March 2011, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton characterized European foreign policy as follows: “the strength of the EU lies, paradoxically, in its inability to throw its weight around. Its influence flows from the fact that it is disinterested in its support for democracy, development and the rule of law. It can be an honest broker – but backed up by diplomacy, aid and great experience.” These and other statements using module components of the civilian power approach outraged James Rogers (2011), editor of the *European Geostrategy* blog, who commented, “the High Representative seems to have danced off into the land of the Cheshire cat.”

The debate appears to be so heated mainly for two reasons. Firstly, from a political point of view, the EU’s self-image implies that that its approach is guided by high normative standards, and thereby minimizes its self-interests, sometimes to the extent that its tone is self-congratulatory. When analysts of European policy come to the conclusion that many European policies appear to be based on “hard” interests such as security or trade, they very often consider it part of their task to dismantle the proclaimed high moral standards of the EU as pure “rhetoric” or “ideology.” This leads to the second point, which has to do with the academic civilian power approach. This quite sophisticated approach, which was developed on the basis of ideas derived from constructivist theories, constitutes a particular challenge for critics. From their point of view it might be rather easy – perhaps even boring – to dismantle idealistic descriptions of American foreign policy as “rhetoric” that hides “hard” interests since the general public (beyond the borders of Amer-

ica) and most scholars are rather disinclined to take the self-image of American administrations too seriously. This is different in the case of European foreign policy.

Whatever one thinks of its usefulness in producing fruitful insights for the analysis of European foreign policy, the civilian power approach has been developed and refined by renowned researchers – such as Hanns W. Maull. The basic idea is that the foreign policy of (some) actors, such as the EU, follows a logic of appropriateness rather than a logic of consequentiality. Thus, in contrast to classic theories such as realism, the civilian power approach as inspired by constructivism assumes that values and norms shape interest generation. The convictions of a civilian power are based on the “civilizational hexagon,” as developed by Dieter Senghaas, according to which foreign policy aims for (the improvement of) “effective control of private violence through the monopolization of force; a culture of non-violent resolution of political disputes; rule of law; development of social division of labour and institutions; participation in decision-making by those affected by them; and social justice” (Maull 2000: 14–15).

Recent Developments in Cross-Mediterranean Relations: An Irony of History

In the 1980s and 1990s, the EU launched policies towards its neighbors on the southern side of the Mediterranean that demonstrated a rhetoric compatible with the values of the civilizational hexagon. Among the highlights was the Venice Declaration (1980), in which the EU stated that the “Palestinian Question” is qualitatively different from a mere refugee problem. In sharp contrast to the then position of the US, the EU acknowledged the Palestinians as a people and demanded that the PLO be integrated into negotiations on a comprehensive peace in the Middle East. Also, by launching the Barcelona Process in 1995, the EU explicitly propagated cooperation aimed at generating a common area of peace and stability and a zone of shared prosperity supplemented by (and based on) a social, cultural and human partnership.

Upon the tenth anniversary of the Barcelona Process, assessments of the process’s success in terms of achievements related to the values of the civilian power approach were nearly unanimously negative. The authoritarianism of the en-

tire Southern Mediterranean region remained unshaken. Moreover, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, there could be hardly any doubt that the crisis the Arab world was going through in terms of its socioeconomic development and the human security provided to its people was at least as severe as that in the 1990s. In subsequent years and continuing up to the start of the Arab Spring, not only the EU's actual foreign policy but also its reasoning and legitimization departed very much from the idea(l)s on which the civilian power approach is based. The agenda of the Union for the Mediterranean adopted a purely technical approach. The initiatives and projects to be launched by the union carefully avoided any issues related to politics, focusing instead on fields in which potential technical win-win situations had been identified – for example, joint energy projects (Schlumberger 2011). At the same time, foreign *policy* towards the Middle East was increasingly left to single member states of the EU, which developed or already had close relationships with authoritarian Arab regimes.

It is an irony of history that when the EU, at least on the rhetorical level, was prepared to promote Arab democratization in the mid-1990s, it could find no counterparts in the Middle East powerful enough to challenge regional authoritarianism. However, when the Arab Spring occurred, the EU and its members were ill prepared since they had come to terms with Arab authoritarianism. Thus, some members of the EU – in particular France, represented by then foreign minister Michèle Alliot-Marie – were actually among the last to break ties with one of the most repressive leaders in the history of the modern Middle East, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (president of Tunisia from 1987 to 2011).

One could imagine that the reality of European foreign policy towards the Middle East could have been the final nail in the coffin for applying the civilian power approach to EU foreign policy. Yet, as has been outlined, this was not the case. Part of the explanation is that although value-based rhetoric in EU papers on the Southern Mediterranean region became less pronounced in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the EU and its representatives never explicitly abandoned their value-based approach. The EU more or less explicitly continued to uphold the image of being a different type of – meant to imply less selfish – actor in international relations. Thus, some scholars and

observers stuck to the concept, and others used it to illustrate the gap between normative pretense and empirical reality – for instance, Peter Seeberg (2009) in his description of the “EU as a realist actor in normative clothes.” Yet, there was also another reason for the survival of the concept's application to cross-Mediterranean relations: it was very difficult for a civilian power to act successfully in the countries of the Southern Mediterranean region before the Arab Spring (Beck 2012). Thus, two years after the start of the Arab Spring, it seems appropriate to raise the question of whether there are indicators that the EU is now acting as a civilian power in the Middle East given the fact that the “excuse” that the Arab world represents a hostile environment for a civilian power is obsolete.

The keynote address given by EU Commission president José Manuel Barroso on 14 July 2012 in Cairo points in this direction. In a speech of remarkable self-criticism, he stated that “In the past too many have traded democracy for stability.” In combination with the amendment that “the road to democracy is not a peaceful stream of water but rather an unpredictable river much like the Nile used to be before the Aswan Dam,” Barroso's statement can be understood as the essence of a foreign policy program towards the Arab world that takes some basic insights of academic International Relations seriously and draws conclusions compatible with the civilian power approach: in relations with systems in transition, such as those produced by the Arab Spring, a trade-off between democratization and stabilization indeed exists. Due to the fact that the degree of participation (of democratic as well as undemocratic groups) in democratization processes is high and democratic institutions are not (yet) consolidated, democratization processes are complex and notoriously produce setbacks, very often taking what appears to be a zigzag course. If a long-term perspective is applied, a civilian power is supposed to both tolerate this and actively promote democratization, thereby holding up the vision of the “democratic peace” according to which genuine long-term stability based on shared democratic values will ultimately be achieved only between democracies; in contrast, cooperative relations with authoritarian regimes do not have the potential to generate more than short- to medium-term stability.

Beyond Barroso's rhetoric of the EU as a civilian power after the Arab Spring, are there indica-

tors that the EU is really inclined to walk the talk of a civilian power in its relations with the Arab world? Three dimensions seem to be crucial in assessing whether the EU is using the opportunity of the Arab Spring for a comeback as a civilian power. Firstly, has the EU actively supported democratization processes? Secondly, has the EU developed adequate approaches to support democratization in the Southern Mediterranean region? And finally, has cooperation on crucial policies been reorganized in a way that is supportive to democratization?

Active Support for Democratization Processes?

In many cases providing active support for the democratization processes of specific countries is a very difficult task, even for an ideal civilian power. Sometimes, potential target countries (such as Egypt) react rather sensitively to overly proactive support, which can be perceived as interference in internal affairs. In other cases (for example, in civil war situations such as that in Syria) supporting democratization with the means available to a civilian power is extremely complicated. However, there has been one case in which the international community was actively asked to support a process that had the potential to promote democratization: In September 2011 the Palestinian leadership of the West Bank, represented by President Mahmud Abbas, announced its eagerness to gain recognition as a full member of the United Nations.

Although the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank suffers from a democratic deficit, since Prime Minister Salim Fayyad was appointed by the president rather than elected by the parliament, the recognition of Palestine as a state could be decisive in terms of democratization since it would imply that those who support it strongly demand the end of occupation by Israel, one of the major authoritarian regimes in the Middle East that has not been shaken by the Arab Spring. Moreover, the Palestinian demand for full membership as a state is a logical follow-up to the Fayyad Plan, which was approved by the West and according to which the PA was required to establish proto-state institutions. A civilian power approach would demand that when the World Bank (2012) officially assessed the Palestinian proto-state institutions as effective, support for the Palestinian proposal

should have been granted – especially as the bilateral approach of negotiations between the Palestinians and Israelis had been declared a failure by no less than US president Barack Obama. He stated in December 2010 that he had given up on convincing Israel to accept even a temporary settlement freeze in the occupied territories.

However, the EU did not provide a statement of support. Moreover, when the PA – due to the US threat that it would veto Palestine's full membership in the UN – applied for full membership in UNESCO (which cannot be vetoed by the members of the Security Council), the EU proved to be unprepared and ineffective as the "Big Three" voted in three different ways in October 2011: France voted yes; the United Kingdom abstained; and Germany voted no. Even when in September 2012 Abbas decided, based on the incidents previously described, to set his sights lower, announcing that Palestine would strive only for an upgrade of its current status as a "non-member observer entity" to a "non-member observer state," the EU did not deliver any kind of coordinated support. This was despite the fact that just before Abbas's speech in the General Assembly the World Bank had confirmed its positive evaluation of the Palestinian proto-state building process, at the same time singling out Israeli occupation as the decisive factor inhibiting further progressive development in the West Bank. To summarize, the EU's recent policy towards Palestine does not meet even the basic standards of a civilian power.

Another critical question worthy of examination is how the EU has handled democratically elected Islamist governments. In two crucial cases in the past, the EU contributed to the marginalization of democratically elected Islamist parties: in Algeria in 1991 and in the Palestinian territories in 2006. In both cases, the ruling authoritarian party leadership – the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) and Fatah – attempted to gain legitimacy by holding elections. In both cases they assumed that their control of authoritarian means would be sufficient for them to win. Although the winners – Front Islamique du Salut (Islamic Salvation Front, FIS) and Hamas – were not democratic parties, democratization could have been the outcome if Hamas and Fatah as well as FIS and FLN, respectively, had been provided with a fair chance to develop. Yet in both cases the EU decided to support the former regime, mainly due to the reasoning that the democratically elected parties had

an anti-Western agenda and could not be expected to easily accept Western terms of cooperation. When, as a result of fair elections in Tunisia and Egypt, Islamist actors succeeded in 2011, the EU did not repeat the mistakes of the past. Since the Arab Spring, the European Union has so far met the standards of a civilian power by recognizing the winning Islamist parties as such.

New Efforts to Support Democratization?

There are two new approaches that have been launched by the EU as a response to the Arab Spring. First, on the conceptual level, the old de facto approach of “one size fits all” has been replaced by a new one officially labeled “more for more.” As the “association agreements” make very apparent, in the past the EU hardly based cooperation in economics and other fields on conditions related to political criteria. This meant, on the one hand, that an extremely repressive regime such as Tunisia under Ben Ali could benefit from European support to a high degree and, on the other, that more liberal autocracies such as Morocco did not receive further incentives to deepen political liberalization. Thus, the *idea* of “more for more” is appropriate for a civilian power. However, thus far it has not been converted into an *implementable* foreign policy concept. Such a conversion would require the development of tools for a continuous and thorough evaluation of the different democratization and liberalization processes according to transparent criteria and benchmarks. The application of transparent criteria appears indeed to be of utmost importance in order to avoid the application of a “more for more” approach on the basis of shared hard interests in policies beyond the scope of democratization. For instance, Jordan under King Abdullah II managed to become a privileged partner of the EU primarily due to its readiness to support Western security and general foreign policy interests (by combating terrorism and maintaining cooperation with Israel) rather than its commitment to political reforms, which, to date, have only been cosmetic.

The European Endowment for Democracy (EED), established by the EU in June 2012, reflects the EU’s aim of cooperating not only with (actually or potentially authoritarian) governments but also directly with civil society on the basis of shared democratic values. However, problems at

different levels remain unresolved. Firstly, appropriate funding has not yet been secured. Secondly, some conceptual problems appear to be grave: how partners from civil society will be chosen – certainly a difficult task for a centralized institution with an office in Brussels only – has not been clarified (Richter and Leininger 2012). Moreover, in light of the Arab Spring it is questionable whether it is really the primary task of a quasi-governmental organization such as the EU to approach Arab civil society. Rather, now that governments have begun to be elected democratically, the EU’s primary task should be to approach those segments of the state institutions that actually or potentially share democratic values in order to strengthen them vis-à-vis those who represent the old forces. It would actually have made more sense to establish the EED before rather than after the Arab Spring. Last but not least, given the relatively well-established European civil society organizations (for instance, the European political foundations), which interact with the civil society in the Arab world on an equal footing, the question of what the added value of a quasi-governmental European institution targeting Arab civil society will be arises.

Cooperation in Crucial Policy Fields: Economics and Migration

Not surprisingly, many Arab economies have been negatively affected in the short run as an immediate effect of the political turmoil of the Arab Spring. Moreover, both the new governments and those that have survived but are under severe pressure to reform face the legacy of state-centered economies that were half-heartedly liberalized and adjusted to global challenges according to the (half-heartedly applied) criteria of the “Washington Consensus.” At the same time, in light of the Arab “youth bulge,” strong pressure exists to promote sustainable economic growth in order to create jobs. Although the Arab systems have not yet managed to develop sophisticated economic strategies to deal with the challenges of the Arab Spring, it is clear that Europe could and should – according to the civilian power approach – support its southern neighbors in two primary ways: by increasing economic exchange (both in terms of opening European markets to Arab goods and European investment in the Southern

Mediterranean region) and pursuing an active migration policy.

Previous economic policies of the EU towards the countries south of the Mediterranean have contributed to the partial liberalization of the Arab economies, particularly via association agreements. At the same time, the EU has failed to open its markets in fields in which the Arab economies are competitive, in particular the agrarian sector and some branches of the service sector. There have been no recent initiatives to liberalize European markets for Arab products. Rather, the traditional European approach of harmonizing trade standards and practices is still being emphasized (Tocci 2011). This approach was successful in relations with Central and Eastern Europe after 1989; however, since there are fewer incentives for European private capital to invest in the Arab world and because there is no prospect of EU membership for the Southern Mediterranean countries, the European approach to the latter countries does not meet their needs.

As the political turmoil in the Arab world began to produce refugees, migration to Europe became an immediate issue to which major EU countries reacted by adopting a short-term security-oriented approach. However, the main development-related challenge in the medium to long term will in all likelihood be economically driven migration from the Middle East to Europe. Even if Arab economies manage to significantly increase growth, the Arab “youth bulge” will most likely create two developmental needs: first, the provision of access to higher education facilities in Europe to Arab students and, second, the offering of temporary assignments with training components to young professionals. Both will require an active and targeted migration policy. However, thus far there have been no strong indicators that the EU will abandon its fairly restrictive migration policy towards the Southern Mediterranean region, which is tailored to what Europe defines as its security needs rather than to the development needs of the Arab world. In this respect, a basic limit of the civilian power approach becomes apparent: since European societies are still struggling to embrace the model of immigration countries and instead tend to uphold cultural barriers, particularly with respect to Islamic countries, the EU’s reluctance to abandon the security-oriented approach of its migration policy may be compre-

hended as democratic, even though it is not compatible with the civilian power approach.

How to Deal with EU Rhetoric

Two years after the beginning of the Arab Spring, there are few indicators that the EU has used the transformation in the Arab world as an opportunity for a comeback as a civilian power in its relations with the countries south of the Mediterranean. Two conclusions should be drawn from this. When it comes to the empirical analysis of EU foreign policy towards the Southern Mediterranean countries, other approaches should be given priority. Moreover, it is advisable that researchers analyze *European* policies – rather than the policies of the EU (which should be perceived as being embedded in the policies of member states and European actions in international organizations such as NATO and the World Bank) – towards the Arab Middle East, thereby focusing on *specific policy fields* rather than on general catch-all issues, in order to avoid being trapped by EU rhetoric. At the same time, in the case of political debates, political consultation and normative analyses, the civilian power approach should still be applied, since the EU’s self-image as a different actor (meant to imply that it is more mature and somehow “better” than others) needs to be dealt with in a critical way. In this way, those segments of the EU bureaucracy that perceive the receipt of the Nobel Prize as an obligation to meet these standards in the future and are ready to walk the talk of the EU’s self-image could be strengthened and activated.

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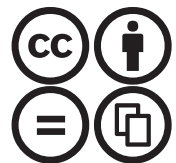
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